

Auschwitz: 60 years ago

SIXTY YEARS AGO ON JANUARY 27, 1945 THE advancing Soviet Red Army suddenly found itself face to face with a ghastly sight deep inside the Polish hinterland: a huge Nazi prison camp hidden in the woods. It looked like a factory but specialised in systematic killing; it was the most infamous Nazi concentration camp of Auschwitz where more than a million human beings, mostly Jews, perished.

Organised along industrial principles, the facility comprised a fleet of doctors, engineers, general administrators, SS personnel and guards who systematically and with clinical efficiency consigned their hapless victims to the gas chambers, where they would die a painful, choking death as poisonous gases were released on them. Those dying there included men and women of all ages as well as some very small children. The Red Army could save only about 7,000 prisoners: emaciated, dirty and thoroughly brutalised and dehumanised, living corpses literally. Auschwitz came to epitomise the ultimate depth of human wickedness.

The camp at Auschwitz was one of the biggest, but there were others spread over central and eastern Europe and some even in Italy and occupied France and Belgium. Besides millions of people they killed through military action in World War II the Nazis also exterminated over 11 million civilians at the concentration camps and other such places. According to the Nazi theory of Aryan supremacy the lesser races were to be annihilated or reduced into a slave workforce. Europe was to be the exclusive domain of the master race — the Aryans.

The Jews were in particular demonised as an evil race. Not surprisingly they constituted the biggest

group among civilians liquidated in the concentration camps and other such places. Between five and six million Jews are estimated to have been killed (60 per cent of the Jewish population of Europe under Nazi control). Others included approximately 400,000 Roma people (who are more commonly known by the derogatory name of Gypsies), 3 million Poles and about 150,000 Germans who were crippled or mentally ill. In the Nazi obsession for the master race there was no place for mental or physical defects even among Aryans. More than a million political opponents such as socialists, social democrats, communists and trade union activists — many of them Russian Communists — were killed. Also killed were between 50,000 to half a million homosexuals and several thousand Jehovah's Witnesses.

In 1996 I participated in a summer course on human rights for university teachers offered at the famous Strasbourg International Human Rights Institute. Some 400 teachers and human rights activists from all over the world had come to the session. We were invited to visit a Nazi concentration camp and many of us availed that opportunity. The concentration camp, now turned into a museum, was tucked up in the hills above Strasbourg. A casual visitor could easily be deceived into believing that it was some rough summer resort or something similar, but we saw that the Nazis had provided it with all the paraphernalia — including the gas chambers — needed to make the death camp function efficiently.

I remember a chill running down my spine as I walked around in the various buildings, almost unwilling, forced to imagine what could have transpired there many, many years ago. To my great sur-

COMMENT



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The crimes committed at Auschwitz and other concentration camps so completely horrified the world that it named them the Holocaust — 'burnt offering'. The newly-founded United Nations adopted the Convention on Genocide and then the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Unfortunately many cases of genocide and ethnic or religious cleansing have taken place since the declaration

prise I found that not only Jews and Roma people (who, incidentally, originate from southern Punjab or the Seraiki belt between Punjab and Sindh and are believed to have moved towards Europe many centuries ago) had been among the hapless victims but also thousands of Soviet prisoners, among whom many were Muslims. In fact the identity card and family picture of a young Muslim victim, probably a Tatar, is on display in the museum. The Nazis had the bizarre habit of retaining such evidence and entering it in their records!

The crimes committed at Auschwitz and other concentration camps so completely horrified the world that it named them the Holocaust, which in Middle English means 'burnt offering'. The United Nations, which had been newly founded (1945), introduced the Convention on Genocide in 1948 that came into effect in 1951 after being ratified by the required number of UN member-states. In 1948 the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted. It was envisaged to provide ample safeguards for human beings as individuals and as members of a community or social group never again to be victimised by a totalitarian ideology, or a tyrannical ruler or some brute imperialist power or fanatical religious or racist movement.

Unfortunately many cases of genocide and ethnic or religious cleansing have taken place since the declaration. The immediate reason for the failure of the world community to prevent massive crimes against humanity was its division in the early 1950s into the Western and Soviet blocs. UN procedures require that the Security Council should order action against ongoing genocide but because of the

ideological competition between the two blocs the veto was exercised many times in the Security Council and the world community could do nothing against such horrible activities.

Last Thursday on January 27, Holocaust survivors and world leaders met in an emotional ceremony in Poland, 60 years after the liberation of the Auschwitz death camp. The ceremony began with a train whistle on the railway track that took more than a million people to their deaths. Thousands gathered in heavy snow next to the site of the gas chambers, where Jews and others were murdered. Jewish, Roman Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant prayers were offered. Former inmates and veterans of the Soviet Red Army who had taken part in the liberation led a candle-lighting ceremony to remember the dead.

At a special UN General Body meeting held to commemorate the liberation of Auschwitz UN Secretary General Kofi Annan said, "The United Nations must never forget that it was created as a response to the evil of Nazism, or that the horror of the Holocaust helped to shape its mission".

The fall of the Soviet Union has brought to an end the vain competition between the two superpowers, but over and over again people are being brutalised under one pretext or another in different parts of the world. Some of the policies of the Israeli state in the occupied Palestinian territories smack of racial superiority and utter disregard for the weak. This is the ultimate irony of our times.

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